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C O N F I D E N T I A L SECTION 01 OF 02 TUNIS 000840

SIPDIS

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PARIS FOR ZEYA

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TAGS: PHUM PGOV TS

SUBJECT: HUMAN RIGHTS WATCH HOLDS FIRST PRESS CONFERENCE IN  
TUNISIA

REF: A. HTTP://WWW.HRW.ORG/REPORTS/2005/TUNISIA0405

- 1B. 2004 TUNIS 2451
- 1C. 2004 TUNIS 2103
- 1D. TUNIS 826
- 1E. 2003 TUNIS 2361

Classified By: Ambassador William J. Hudson; reasons: 1.4(b/d)

1. (C) Summary: Two visiting Human Rights Watch (HRW) staffers successfully held a press conference April 20 to release a new HRW report on solitary confinement of Tunisian political prisoners. The 39-page report is based on interviews of political prisoners conditionally released in the November 2004 amnesty. During the press event, in addition to describing the continuing poor treatment of prisoners in the country, the HRW staffers mentioned a number of positive developments: the GOT had agreed to let them hold the press conference; a "senior official" (ATCE DG Ossama Romdhani, HRW revealed to us privately) promised them April 19 that the GOT would no longer subject political prisoners to solitary confinement (while still refusing to admit specifically that Tunisia holds any political prisoners); and, another "senior official" (we believe in Ministry of Justice) said HRW would be allowed to tour a Tunisian prison when they next visited the country. The HRW staffers said the GOT claimed that ICRC prison visits are "on the verge" of taking place; however, there are other indications that optimism on this issue would be premature. The HRW visit and public release of the report is a surprising and welcome development. On the other hand, we have learned that the GOT asked UNDP's Tunis office to cancel its plans to publicly release the Arab Human Development Report at a press conference originally scheduled for April 11, although the UNDP has had no trouble distributing the report. End Summary.

HRW holds press conference to release critical report  
of solitary confinement procedures in prisons  
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2. (U) Two visiting Human Rights Watch (HRW) staffers assigned to cover the MENA region (Executive Director Sarah Leah Whitson and Research Director Eric Goldstein) successfully held a press conference April 20 to release a new HRW report critical of the solitary confinement of Tunisian political prisoners, entitled "Crushing the person, crushing a movement." It follows up on a groundbreaking report on the same subject released last year (which was not released in Tunisia). The press conference was held at the Tunisian Human Rights League (LTDH) headquarters and was attended by local and foreign journalists, although three-quarters of the approximately 100 attendees at the press conference were human rights activists, opposition party leaders, and/or former political prisoners.

3. (U) The new 39-page report (available online Ref A) is based on interviews of political prisoners conditionally released in the November 2004 amnesty (Ref B). In addition to the two HRW staffers, prominent Tunisian civil society leaders also made presentations at the press conference, including LTDH President Mokhtar Trifi, AISPP President Mohamed Nouri, and Kalima editor Sihem Bensedrine. A small number of the former prisoners included in the report were present at the press conference and one, Zied Douletli, delivered a personal account of his fourteen years spent in prison. Families of current prisoners also spoke. Goldstein reported that the GOT told him that many prisoners had "volunteered" for solitary confinement; however, he said his interviews had revealed many of these so-called requests to be not for solitary confinement but to be moved to other less-crowded or non-smoking cells.

4. (U) Discussion of current human rights cases focused on three individuals: Abdullah Zouari, currently "banished" by GOT administrative control measures to the southern Tunisian town of Zarzis (Ref C); journalist Hamadi Jebali currently incarcerated in the Sfax prison and conducting a hunger strike (Ref B); and, lawyer Mohamed Abbou, arrested for writing articles published online critical of the regime (Ref D).

Deliverables: Positive ... In Theory  
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15. (U) At the press conference, Goldstein reported that the HRW visit had made several significant achievements:

- >> Although other international NGOs had presented reports at LTDH-hosted press conferences, this was the first time HRW had been able to do so, and they had experienced significant cooperation -- and no harassment -- from the GOT, unlike in previous years. Goldstein noted that the GOT had harassed Tunisians for cooperating with HRW in the past (e.g., Zouari, see Ref F); and he said they planned to follow up with the former prisoners who contributed to the report to confirm they would not face any repercussions.
- >> A senior GOT official pledged to end solitary confinement for political prisoners, although he said the GOT persists in denying that it has political prisoners or prisoners of opinion. Solitary confinement will continue as a form of punishment of common law prisoners who break rules or who otherwise need special confinement. Prisoners will no longer be allowed to request solitary confinement, in order to avoid confusion over whether or not the prisoner was being held in solitary confinement against his will.
- >> Another senior GOT official promised to let HRW staff tour a Tunisian prison the next time they visit the country, although Goldstein admitted that the official had caveated that HRW and the GOT still needed to work out the modalities first. That official also told the HRW staffers that the GOT was "on the verge" of reaching an agreement with the ICRC to allow prison visits.

16. (C) In an April 19 courtesy call with the Ambassador and embassy staff, Whitson revealed that Tunisian External Communication Agency (ATCE) Director General Ossama Romdhani had been their primary interlocutor, along with human rights officials in the MFA and Ministry of Justice and Human Rights. She said they noted to Romdhani that it had been nearly one year since the GOT first announced that the ICRC could visit Tunisian prisons; yet, no visits had taken place thus far. She asked Romdhani when they could expect the ICRC to conduct its first prison visit, but Romdhani was noncommittal.

17. (C) The HRW staffers had been scheduled to meet P/E Counselor on the evening of April 19 to discuss their meetings in greater detail; however, Romdhani requested that they meet him for a ten minute meeting to discuss urgent developments. The staffers expected Romdhani at least to ask them to cancel the press conference and at most to ask them to leave the country. However, he told them the GOT would not object to their press conference, and he told them that they could announce that the GOT had agreed to cease the practice of solitary confinement for political prisoners.

Comment

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18. (C) The press conference, complete with personal testimonies and the public release of the report, is a surprising and welcome development. The HRW representatives clearly were pleased at their reception and claimed their conversations with Romdhani were extremely frank. As usual, it is not readily apparent what motivated the GOT to facilitate the event and make the kind of forward-leaning gestures the HRW claims. We tend to believe, as stated previously, that Tunisian authorities have made the calculation that the political prisoner issue is one they can address with relative confidence. Most prisoners are nearing the end of their sentences or already have been released.

19. (C) Muting optimism is also the fact that the head of the UNDP office here told the Ambassador that a similar public event to release the third Arab Human Development Report had been planned for April 11 but had been cancelled -- at the GOT's unexplained request -- at the last minute, although he noted the UNDP had had no trouble distributing the report. We also caution that the long-awaited agreement with the ICRC to allow prison visits is still not signed despite claims from both the GOT and the ICRC that all points have been agreed on. Even taking all the above into account, this development is worthy of note in our conversations with GOT officials.

HUDSON